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SUBJECT: LARGE PRAYER VIGIL NEAR HANOI CATHEDRAL, AP REPORTER ASSAULTED BY POLICE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Between 150 and 200 Catholic priests and an equal number of supporters gathered in prayer outside the former residence of the Papal Nuncio to protest ongoing destruction of property claimed by the Church. According to priests, riot police and construction teams arrived in the early morning of September 19 to carry out a Hanoi Government order to turn the disputed property into a park/library. An Amcit AP reporter covering the vigil was hit by police after he began taking photographs and briefly taken into custody. Embassy officers secured his release and accompanied him to a local expatriate medical facility. The Embassy strongly protested the incident. Text of our diplomatic note and draft press guidance follow in paragraphs 5 and 6. END SUMMARY.

EARLY MORNING DESTRUCTION/CONSTRUCTION

¶2. (SBU) According to priests associated with the Hanoi Archdiocese, riot police began arriving at the former residence of the Papal Nuncio (long the subject of a land dispute between the Church and the People's Committee of Hanoi) at around 3:00 am September 19, followed soon after by construction crews and equipment. By 5:00 am the street in front of the disputed property had been cordoned off and the fence surrounding the Nunciature torn down. Arriving at approximately 10:30, Deputy PolCouns saw bulldozers digging up the yard in front of the former residence; a backhoe had finished demolishing several smaller structures to the side of the residence. Priests and others at the site reported that the authorities were enforcing an edict dated the same day declaring that the property surrounding the residence would be made into a park and the building itself turned into a library. The edict came one day after the Archbishop's office had announced plans to hold a large prayer vigil to protest the local authorities' failure to fulfill their promise to return the disputed land.

¶3. (SBU) Priests from the Archdiocese, which is located immediately adjacent to the former residence, began to gather shortly after Morning Prayer, at around 8:00 am. By mid-morning, approximately 150 priests from the Archdiocese and surrounding parishes had assembled in neat rows in a prayer vigil in the street facing the property. Priests and lay supporters said that they did not know how long they would remain. Later in the afternoon, police had sealed off the dormitories of the priests and nuns located near the site and were not allowing people to enter or leave, according to a priest involved in the vigil.

AP JOURNALIST BEATEN BY POLICE

¶4. (SBU) At approximately 10:45 am, PAS was contacted by the Associated Press Hanoi bureau chief, an Amcit, who reported that he had been beaten by plainclothes police and was being taken to a nearby police station. DPolCouns located the journalist, who was being led into a local police office near the Hanoi Cathedral. (Consular arrest report septel.) The journalist had a laceration on the upper back part of his head, and though the wound itself had stopped bleeding, there was a considerable amount of blood on his

neck, shirt, and pants. (Note: a video of the journalist being led away has been posted on "Vietcatholic.net," www.vietcatholic.net/News/Html/58708.htm. End note.) After some discussion, DPolCouns and Conoff received assurances that the journalist was no longer being held and could leave. After submitting a written complaint describing the incident, the journalist was accompanied by Conoff to a local expatriate clinic, where the journalist, visibly shaken and still very angry, received four stitches in his head. The journalist refused to sign -- and Embassy officers declined to accept -- a sanitized version of events drafted by the investigating officer.

EMBASSY PROTESTS INCIDENT

¶5. (SBU) The DCM -- in the absence of the Ambassador, who is visiting the Central Highlands -- expressed indignation over the incident to MFA Americas Director General Nguyen Ba Hung, emphasizing that it was inexcusable for an American citizen to be beaten by police. The DCM explained in blunt terms that assaulting a journalist during the course of his lawful activities was not a wise course of action and pressed Vietnam to investigate the matter fully. The Embassy also submitted the following diplomatic note to protest the event formally.

Begin text:

The Embassy of the United States of America presents its compliments to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and has the honor to inform the Ministry of our grave concern regarding the detainment and physical abuse of an American journalist by police the morning of September 19. While observing

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the ongoing church protests at Nha Chung street, Associated Press journalist Ben Stocking was beaten without justification and had his camera confiscated by the police. As a result of his mistreatment, Mr. Stocking sustained head injuries and required medical treatment.

The Embassy strongly objects to aggressive actions being taken against any individual - whether American or not - who is observing or participating in a peaceful gathering. The Embassy requests that the Government of Vietnam investigate this incident and inform the Embassy of the appropriate steps it intends to take.

In connection with this incident, the Embassy takes this opportunity to renew our expression of concern regarding the government's response to ongoing Catholic Church land protests. The Embassy is troubled by the government action at the Nha Chung property and the growing number of arrests of individuals who have participated in peaceful prayer vigils at the Thai Ha parish. In our interactions with Government of Vietnam officials, the Embassy has regularly urged that Committee on Religious Affairs address the long-standing Church property claims of religious groups in Vietnam. We also urge the Hanoi People's Committee to engage in a dialogue directly with Catholic leaders and believers in order to seek a mutually agreeable resolution to property disputes regarding Church properties confiscated over the years.

The Embassy of the United States of America in Hanoi avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the assurances of its highest consideration.

End text.

¶6. (SBU) Begin text of draft press guidance:

VIETNAM: Beating and Detention of American Journalist

¶Q. What is the U.S. Government/ American Embassy response to the beating and detention of Associated Press Journalist and American citizen Ben Stocking in Hanoi on September 19?

-- The Associated Press journalist notified the Embassy immediately

after this incident. Embassy officers, including a consular official, responded quickly to assist with his interaction with the police and to seek medical attention.

-- We strongly object to any aggressive actions being taken against any individual, American or otherwise, who is observing or participating in a peaceful gathering.

-- We have protested the incident to the government and look forward to hearing what steps have been taken - both in response to this incident and to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

-- At the request of this individual, we refer further questions to the Associated Press.

End text.

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